

RACISM IN HARRY POTTER SERIES

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates racism in Harry Potter series in the twenty first century perspective that describes how the people of colour is used to construct a psychological and cultural self that legitimizes White privilege.. Representations of the people of colour in the series are critiqued, including the construction of false equality and claims of White innocence.

KEYWORDS: Harry Potter Series, Racism, White Privilege, Blood, Representation, Colour

INTRODUCTION

"I have the blood of Africa within me," Blood does mean race; it always has, and despite DNA evidence, I suspect it always will. It is too powerful, too important a metaphor, (President Obama, Accra, Ghana.)

Race is pervasive in the twenty first century and racism continues to pervade our society. The society sculpts unjust divisions among groups and they perpetuate it to our children and their children. This is true in the United States past, the Indian past and present and the world society in general. In the English society, social life is often understood in dichotomous terms-White versus non-White-with Whites seeing racial "others" as fairly monolithic. Today racism operates in an implicit manner. People perpetuate racism without even being aware of it. Rowling in her Harry Potter series creates a magical parallel universe of our world where she tries to explore the theme of racism. But Rowling is white. It is questionable as to what extent she would be able to sympathise with the people of colour. Rowling is part of the new postmodern society where the whites advocate colour blind racism. Colour blind racism maintains that racial hierarchy doesn't exist. But a close reading of the series reveals that racism exists in the Harry Potter series.

Racism plays an important role in Rowling's Harry Potter series, but it remains largely invisible to our eyes because the series is understood as pure fantasy. The series is a biting illustration of how the halfbloods, the muggleborns, the mixed breeds and the squibs suffer under the superiority of the pure bloods. Privileging the pure bloods and treating the halfbloods and muggles as second class citizens is a glaring analogy to the English cultures framework of persecution of the people of colour. The halfbloods, the muggleborns, the mixed breeds and the squibs can be taken as symbolic racial categories.

Rowling in her series naively tries to create an Arcadia where everyone is treated equally on the content of their character, their actions, merits and morals rather than their skin colour. "It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our biological or God-given] abilities," says Dumbledore (Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets 333). Harry later reminds Fudge, the Minister of Magic "You place too much importance...on the so-called purity of blood! You fail to recognize that it matters not what someone is born, but what they grow to be!" (Harry Potter and the The Goblet of Fire 708).

On the surface the novel presents a strong utopian vision devoid of racism. She even tries to present an anti racist vision by creating a handful of non-White characters, including Lee Jordan, Dean Thomas, Angelina Johnson, and Parvati Patil, as well as Harry's first romantic interest, Cho Chang. In spite of this on close scrutiny we find that the novel has at its

centre the serious issue of racism. The non white characters are mostly relegated and the whites enjoy the limelight. None of the non white characters enjoy reputed positions nor are the characters developed adequately. Exceptions to be pointed out in this case are Cho Chang and Kingsly Amis, who are the only non white characters who are developed to some extent in the novel.

There are several examples of racism in Harry Potter series. Dean is one of those non white underdeveloped characters who deserve some character development. He is present in the series from the beginning to the end. He plays some crucial roles as Harry's fellow gryfindor, Ginnys boyfriend and undergoes some really interesting adventures in Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows. But yet Rowling does not consider him important enough to be developed to a central position. Rowling describes him as "A black boy even taller than Ron". This ostensibly clean-handed phrase contains within itself several racial innuendos. Rowling uses the term 'black' which is an implicitly racist term. To say Dean is "a dark-skinned boy" would have been more appropriate. Then again, by pointing out that Dean is "even taller than Ron", Rowling brings out a comparison between Dean and Ron, between the 'black' and the 'white'. She is in this way advocating that we can only understand blackness by ascribing it to whiteness.

Another important dimension of the narrative is how Rowling devalues her non white characters by portraying them in a "use and throw manner". Many of the white characters find their first love interest in the non whites only to discard them when they find their white partners. Dean and Cho are two such examples. As the series progresses Ginny discards Dean and chooses Harry and Harry discards Cho for Ginny. The female characters of colour are even more abased. They are treated as objects that can be easily obtained and discarded. Fred Weasley shows Harry and Ron how easy it is to get a date by snapping his fingers and getting Angelina, who is dark, all excited about being his date.

Blood Status is another determining factor in the Harry Potter series. The wizarding society is categorised into different sections based on the purity of blood. Some of the pure bloods consider themselves as Sans Pareil and treats others as inferior. The series reads like a realistic commentary on human experience, on how the dark skinned people were subjugated by the whites. Rowling thus creates a caste system akin to our Indian caste system, where the pure bloods are placed at the top and then the half-bloods, the mixed breeds, the completely muggle-born witch or wizard, the squib and blood traitors in that order. Only the pure bloods are given premium status and the others are treated as second class citizens, which reminds us strongly of the history of the oppression of the blacks

It is possible to analyze the racist attitude of the pure bloods at two different levels. There are instances of both explicit racism and implicit racism. An instance of explicit racism that can be quoted is when Harry first meets Malfoy in Madame Malkin's. Draco says to him, "I really don't think they should let the other sort in, do you? They're just not the same; they've never been brought up to know our ways... I think they should keep it in the old wizarding families..." (Harry Potter and the Philosophers Stone 78). Draco's statement insists the importance of ancestry and blood status. Salazar Slytherin, one of the co-founders of Hogwarts wanted to deny entry to students of mixed bloods. The Slytherins still adhere to his ideas and thus Draco's insistence to keep the magic to the purebloods. Thus this attitude compels us to see Muggles and wizards as racial groups. This is best exemplified by the portrait of Sirius's mother. When someone who is not a pureblood enters her ancestral home, she screams: "Filth! Scum! By-products of dirt and vileness! Half-breeds, mutants, freaks, begone from this place! How dare you befoul the house of my fathers. . . . Yooooou!" she howled, her eyes popping at the sight of the man [Sirius]. Blood traitor, abomination, shame of my flesh" (Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix 78). Her shibboleth conveys several racial innuendos, that anyone other than the purebloods are undesirable and that their very presence would disturb the sanctity of her house. The blood traitors are considered to be as subhuman and inferior as the halfbloods. As a result Sirius who befriends halfbloods is considered despicable. The muggles in the series

are as much prone to racism as the wizards in the Potter universe. Marge Dursley comments on Harry that: "This one's got a mean, runty look about him. You get that with dogs. I had Colonel Fubster drown one last year. Ratty little thing it was. Weak. Underbred." (Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban 27). Marge Dursley is an obvious parallel to the Sytherins who believes in preserving the purity of blood at all costs. Marge seems to believe that the afflicted should be removed from the society through euthanasia. She says: 'It all comes down to blood'. Racism is also directed at such outcasts as the squibs, the house elves and the werewolf's, who suffer at the hands of societies intolerance for them.

Explicit racism is no longer advocated in our current society today's racism is more subtle, implicit. Some people remain racist, most often without realizing it. These people may hate racism and consider it evil, but they do perpetuate racism without being aware of having done so. In the Potter series Harry, Ron and Hermione apparently appear to be anti racist and upholders of egalitarian intentions. Throughout the series we find that they treat everyone as equal and are sympathetic towards those in need. Harry frees Dobby and Hermione campaigns for elf rights. On the surface they do not appear to have any racist tendencies. They don't intentionally hurt, humiliate, or intimidate others based on racial status. But today racism operates at an unconscious level. This is evidenced in Ron's prejudicial statements against giants, werewolves and house elves. Harry and Ron's indifference to S.P.E.W. is yet another instance.

It is often difficult to analyze the presence of implicit and averse racism in people. So social psychologist developed the Implicit Association Test,(IAT) which is an online test for measuring the implicit attitudes and stereotypes. This was developed by Brian Nosek, Mahzarin Banaji, and Anthony Greenwald in 1998. An implicit stereotype, according to the IAT is a stereotype that is powerful enough to operate without conscious control. Some facts about IAT result show that implicit bias is observed even in children as young as four years of age. Implicit biases have been observed to vary according one's own group and life experiences. IAT have also predicted that those people who show stronger IAT-measured biases against a target social group are also more likely to discriminate against that target group and its member. An IAT test performed on Rowling's characters would reveal that almost all the white characters would have an implicit racial bias. The Slytherins would undoubtedly show explicit racial attitudes. The Weasleys would certainly have implicit racial attitudes, primarily because they are a family with pure blood ancestry. One example of implicit racism that can be cited is Molly Weasley's desire to own a house elf. Almost every character except Hermione and Harry shows an implicit anti-elf bias.

Thus even a popular fantasy fiction like Harry Potter is loaded with racial prejudice. Fundamentally there seems to be no intellectual difference among the characters, but still the racial 'others' are prejudiced, are kept a step lower to the whites. We find that almost all the characters perpetuate racism knowingly or unknowingly. Thus even a pure fantasy no longer seems to be as innocent as it seems.

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